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ABSTRACT

Numerous studies have demonstrated predictive links between children's attachment relationships with parents and teachers and their success in the social contexts of child care and school. This body of research underlines the importance of children's ability to establish positive relationships with adults and to effectively use these adults to meet their social and emotional needs. This study used an observational procedure, based on White and Watt's (1973) categories for assessing children's social interactions with adults, to measure the social abilities of 68 2.5-year-old children across social contexts of the home, the child care center, and the "strange situation." Children's social bids were defined as: (1) seeking attention; (2) seeking help; (3) seeking to control; (4) seeking emotional support; (5) initiating play; and (6) offering help. Affectionate and hostile behaviors toward adults were also recorded. The contexts in which children's social interactive behaviors were assessed placed differing social and emotional demands on them. Results led to arguments for hierarchical versus independent models of child-adult relationships, assessing whether the mother-child prototype for social interaction with adults or the differing demands of separate social contexts determines children's social interactive style. The results also have implications for interpreting observational research across different cultural contexts. (Contains 20 references.) (BGC)

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CHILDREN'S INTERACTIVE STYLE WITH PARENTS, TEACHERS AND STRANGERS :

A COMPARATIVE STUDY ACROSS THREE CONTEXTS

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ABSTRACT

Numerous studies have demonstrated predictive links between children's attachment relationships with parents and teachers, and their subsequent or concurrent success in the social contexts of child care and school. This body of research underlines the importance of children's ability to establish positive relationships with adults, both parental and non-parental, and to effectively use these adults to meet their social and emotional needs.

An observational procedure, based on White and Watt's (1973) categories for assessing children's social interactions with adults was used to measure the social abilities of sixty-eight 2 1/2-year-old children across three social contexts : the home, the child care centre, and the Strange Situation. Children's social bids were defined as seeking attention, seeking help, seeking to control, seeking emotional support, initiating play, offering help, and coded according to whether these bids were successful or unsuccessful. Children's affectionate and hostile behaviours towards adults were also recorded.

The three contexts in which children's social interactive behaviours were assessed placed differing social and emotional demands on the child : the home, where the child's social style develops within a specific, individual family network; the child care centre, where the child operates within a more standardised, child-focused environment but has to compete with many other children for adult attention and support; and the Strange Situation, in which the child's social interaction is with an available and friendly stranger, but in a forced situation designed to heighten the child's emotional state.

Results will be discussed in relation to the differing social and emotional demands of the three settings and the degree of concordance in children's social interactive style across these contexts. Arguments for hierarchical versus independent models of child-adult relationships, that is, whether the mother-child prototype for social interaction with adults or the differing demands of separate social contexts determines children's social interactive style, will be put forward. Implications for interpreting observational research across different cultural contexts will also be discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Children's style of interaction with adults is thought to be derived from the formative patterns found in the family. A principal tenet of attachment theory holds that patterns of social interaction established between infants and their primary caregivers are internalised, and influence the child's subsequent behavioural style with other adults (Bowlby, 1981; Sroufe, 1983). For example, an interaction style characterised by smooth, reciprocal and enjoyable exchanges with the mother is seen to lay the foundation for a general sense of confidence and competence when functioning with non-parental adults. This hierarchical model of social interaction, which sees the child's experience with the mother as leading to expectations that guide the way the child organises his or her behaviour towards other adults, conceptualises the mother-child relationship as the most powerful, although not the only factor, determining child social development (Bowlby,1981; Sroufe, 1983; Main, Kaplan & Cassidy,1985; Turner, 1993).

A number of authors have questioned this emphasis on the singular contribution of the infant-mother attachment relationship to children's style of social interaction, particularly in the current social climate where the majority of children are experiencing moderate amounts of regular non-maternal care in the first year of life (NICHD, 1996). It has been suggested that the "developmental processes of influence may actually be distinctly different in the case of children with and without extensive nonparental care experiences" (Belsky, 1990,p.897). From this perspective, it has been argued that home and home-plus-child care represent distinct social ecologies, and attachment to alternative carers rather than attachment to the mother is the stronger predictor of social outcomes when children have experienced extensive nonparental care in the first year of life (Howes, Matheson & Hamilton,1994; Oppenheim, Sagi & Lamb, 1988; Belsky & Cassidy, 1994). This view is supported by reports that there is a lack of continuity between child-mother attachment and later social outcomes for a sample of children with extensive infant day care (Egeland and Hiester,1995).

These different perspectives on the processes influencing children's style of social interaction may not be mutually exclusive. The varying influences of

multiple caregivers and multiple caregiving settings has recently been conceptualised as a "network" of relationships which impact on the child's social development. Howes and colleagues (Howes & Matheson, 1992; Hamilton & Howes, 1992) have argued that child-adult relationships are embedded within a specific context, and that particular activities and settings characterise social interactions and roles. From this perspective, the predictive effect of each child-caregiver relationship is specific to the domain in which the child and caregiver function (Van IJzendoorn, Sagi and Lambermon, 1992).

The present study was designed to explore these different perspectives through an assessment of the degree of concordance in children's style of social interaction across three different types of adults and three distinct settings - - parents in the home, familiar caregivers in the child care centre, and a friendly stranger in the Strange Situation Procedure. The observational data base we used had been collected as part of a longitudinal study of emotional development in children in the first three years of life. Our aim was to consider the effectiveness of a hierarchical model, which sees the child's relationship with the mother as forming the prototype for social interaction with other adults, *versus* an independent, or context specific, model in which the differing demands of separate social contexts determine children's social interactive style. We sought to address the question of whether children's patterns of social interaction and social relationships with adults derive primarily from the infant-mother attachment relationship or whether these vary with the contextual framework that different settings have for the child.

METHOD

Subjects

The 61 participants (31 boys) were a subsample of a larger longitudinal study of 149 children, and were selected on the basis of their attendance at child care centres when the children were assessed at the 2 1/2 year old follow-up. The children were all first-born, and their mothers were all English-speaking but representative of a broad range of age and educational level. Parent interviews carried out during the first year provided a comprehensive record of children's experience of maternal and non-maternal care. Sixty-nine

percent of the children we observed had received regular non-maternal care of 10 or more hours per week before the age of one year.

Procedure

1. The quality of the infant-mother attachment relationship was assessed at age 12 months using the Strange Situation procedure (Ainsworth et al.,1978). Raters received training in the use of the scoring system from Dr. R. Marvin, University of Virginia, and achieved the required reliability before scoring the sample. Sixty-seven percent of the children were classified as having a secure relationship with the mother. Chi-square analysis indicated that there was no difference in the distribution of secure and insecure attachment between the group of children who had experienced exclusive maternal care in the first year and the group that had entered early child care (see TABLE 1).

2. Child social interaction with adults was assessed at age 30 months in two familiar social contexts - the home and the child's regular child care centre, and an unfamiliar social setting, the Strange Situation Procedure. Home observations were arranged at a time convenient for the parents, usually during the mid-morning or afternoon on a weekend when the child would be playing and both parents were at home. Parents were instructed to act as they normally would. Child behaviours were recorded using a time-sampling procedure and distributed across the 2-hour visit. Child care centre observations were always carried out in the morning, beginning when the child arrived at the centre and extending for 2 to 2 1/2 hours. Time-sampled observations were collected across the range of morning activities and routines. The Strange Situation Procedure, which includes two 3-minute separations when the child is alone with a friendly, available stranger, were videotaped and these two episodes were scored continuously, using 10-second observation periods.

The observational procedure used in all three settings assessed the type and successfulness of children's social initiatives to adults (White & Watts, 1973; Wright, 1983). Six categories of child social behaviour were recorded to describe the expected range of positive and negative initiations. Positive behaviours were defined as seeking attention, by positive means, such as touching, greeting, showing toys, etc; seeking to use the adult as an instrumental resource, eg. asking for information, help, food, etc; initiating

social interaction, such as in a verbal game, pretend play or close physical play; and seeking to help the adult, by showing concern, sharing, or voluntarily helping with chores. Negative behaviours were defined as seeking attention by negative means, such as showing off, shouting, whining, etc., and seeking to control the adult, by contradicting, stopping adult play, etc. These behaviours were coded as to whether each bid was successful or unsuccessful. Three categories of child affective expression were also recorded. These were defined as seeking emotional support or comfort when distressed; showing positive affect towards the adult, by smiling, laughing or other affectionate behaviours; and showing negative affect by being physically or verbally hostile towards the adult.

In the home we distinguished between bids made to the mother, the father, to both parents together, or to other adults; however in the child care centre, this distinction between different teachers or child care staff was not possible. Inter-rater reliability was established in homes and child care centres, and maintained throughout the 3-year data collection period (Cohen's Kappa > .8). The coding procedure was reviewed prior to scoring the Strange Situation sequences, and the existing coding system was found to be applicable. However an additional negative behaviour which had not been seen in children's interactions with adults in the home or child care centre was described. This behaviour, initiates social play in a hostile way, was found to be strongly correlated with seeking attention by negative means. The range of children's affective expression also needed to be extended, to include accepts comfort and rejects comfort offered by the stranger. Reliability was re-established for the Strange Situation (Cohen's Kappa .879)

Data Analysis

Because the number of observation periods varied across settings and by individual child, individual scores were standardised to a percent occurrence for each behaviour.

RESULTS

1. Variability of Social Behaviours Across Settings

The first stage of our analysis assessed whether the different social contexts of home, child care and the Strange Situation were associated with differing patterns of child social interaction. We anticipated that the expectations and demands of each context would be reflected in the frequency of particular behaviours used by the children in their bids to adults. Looking first at mean scores for positive initiatives, children's bids for attention were found to be similar across the three settings (TABLE 2), however, mean scores for behaviours whose function was to initiate a more extensive involvement with the adult, ie. using adults as a resource, social play and helping behaviour, were found to be highest in the home. Children's expression of positive affect was also higher in the home which would be expected in a setting where strong emotional bonds are typical. Our results showed that whilst positive bids tended to be more frequent in the home, overall, children used a similar range and variety of positive social behaviours in all three settings.

Children's use of negative social initiatives, however, did not show the same similarity across settings (TABLE 3). Negative behaviour and negative affect expression towards adults was seen far less frequently in child care centres compared to the home and the Strange Situation. This finding is consistent with the early childhood philosophy of caregiving, which models positive, respectful behavioural interchanges, and expects children to adhere to scripts for appropriate conduct. The atmosphere of happy, purposeful involvement which is the goal of early childhood centres is not conducive to negativity in adult-directed behaviour. Negative social initiatives occurred most frequently in the home. The expression of negative affect was most evident in the Strange Situation, which is consistent with the enhanced level of stress induced by this procedure; however, mean scores for negative affect were not significantly different from levels observed in the home. Our findings indicate that children's use of negative behavioural strategies with adult partners is strongly influenced by setting, suggesting that context not only provides the framework for social interaction but the expectations and limitations which determine the range and variety of child behavioural expression.

2. Consistency of Social Interactive Style and Social Settings

Our next question was to consider the extent to which individual children showed consistency of social interactive style across the three settings and the three types of social partners, parents, teachers, and strangers. Our initial screening of children's interactions with parents had indicated that although mean scores for total bids to mothers and fathers were similar, correlational analyses indicated that children targeted mothers and fathers somewhat differently. We decided therefore to conduct separate analyses for behaviours directed to mothers and fathers. In order to reduce the number of statistical analyses, and to enhance reliability, the four categories of positive initiatives and the two categories of negative initiatives were collapsed to form two clusters, total positive bids and total negative bids (TABLES 2, 3). The internal validity of these clusters was confirmed by factor analysis which indicated moderate to high inter-correlations amongst combined behaviours.

A model explaining children's social behaviour from an attachment theory framework would predict associations between children's social initiatives to their mother and to other adults, which should be independent of setting. Little support for this prediction was found in our analyses of positive social initiatives. Assessment of concordance across the three settings using intra class correlational analysis gave a zero result (icc=.000). Children's use of positive initiatives in their interactions with the mother was not correlated with similar behaviours to their child care teachers or to a friendly stranger.

However, associations between children's positive social initiatives to non-maternal adults were observed, (FIGURE 1). There was a moderate concordance between children's use of positive social bids directed to fathers and to teachers (rho = .344**). This finding suggests that the affiliative role played by fathers in the child's interactions with parents (Lamb, 1986) may resemble the instructive partnership that children develop with their teachers to a greater extent than the caregiving role played by mothers.

Concordance was also seen between children's positive behaviours to teachers and to a friendly, unfamiliar adult in the Strange Situation (rho = .333*). Whilst this laboratory procedure is situationally very different from attendance at child care, similarities can be drawn. Both offer the opportunity

for play with stimulating materials and supportive adult involvement. Our results for concordance between child behaviour to fathers and teachers and for teachers and strangers are consistent with the view articulated by Howes and Matheson (1992) that consistency across activity settings is likely to be reflected in consistency in functionally equivalent social relationships. Also of interest is the inverse association we observed between children's positive initiatives to mothers *versus* fathers in the home. This result may also reflect the different role functions assumed by mother and fathers in our observational context of a weekend at home, where parents were often seen to share the responsibilities of caregiving and housekeeping through complementary parental roles.

We then repeated our analyses focussing on children's use of negative strategies in their interaction with adults. Because of the low levels of negative behaviour in child care centres, we limited our analyses to a comparison of behaviours observed in the home and in the Strange Situation. Pairwise correlations for total negative initiatives to mothers, fathers and strangers provided some support for the attachment model of generalised influence deriving from the mother-child relationship, FIGURE 2. There was consistency in children's use of negative strategies to initiate social interaction with the mother and the stranger (rho = .410**). In contrast there was an inverse relationship between negative bids to father and mother, and to father and stranger. Both results may reflect the differing functions attributed to mothers *versus* fathers. Bridges and Connell (1991) have reported that changing from a non-stressful to a stressful social setting resulted in a shift in emotional response for child-mother pairs but not for child-father pairs. Children's attachment needs tend to be attributed to mothers. This evidence suggests that children's responses to emotional stress and the use of negative social behaviour towards an adult in the Strange Situation is more likely to be consistent with patterns of child-mother interaction rather than child-father interaction.

3. Consistency of Social Interactive Style and Infant-Mother Attachment

The results reported so far have provided some support for the view that the differing demands and characteristics of social contexts determine children's social interactive style. We have argued that where role relationships in different settings are comparable in their social expectations, children show a

moderate degree of concordance in their interactions with adults. Our results also showed modest support for the broader influence of the mother-child relationship, particularly when negative social initiatives were considered.

To explore further aspects of the mother-child relationship influence, we divided the children by their security of attachment groupings and assessed whether the significant associations we observed were evident in both insecure and secure groups. Where the numbers of children displaying the behaviours indicated the need for caution in interpreting these figures, rank order correlations were also calculated to confirm significance. Looking first at the within-group effects for secure versus insecure children (TABLE 4), our analysis revealed that significant relationships were maintained only for those children who were classified as securely attached at 12 months. This pattern was evident for all four concordant relations - positive behaviours shown across child-to-teacher/child-to-stranger and child-to-father/child-to-teacher interactions, and negative behaviours across child-to-mother/child-to-stranger and child-to-father/child-to-stranger settings. This finding is in accord with the view that a secure attachment relationship with the mother provides the child with a framework for managing social interactions with other adults, and that supports the view that securely-attached children are more coherent in their interactive style across settings.

CONCLUSIONS

Our assessment of the consistency of children's social interactive style across settings and social partners was driven by two models of social development. We sought to contrast the view that the quality of the infant-mother attachment relationship predicts children's interactive style with adults outside the family, against the perspective that children's social strategies reflect the demands of specific contexts. Our results have given support to both of these models. Comparison of children's social interactions with different adults in different settings indicated that consistency of social interactive style across contexts was defined by the behavioural expectations of the context and by the contributions made by different social partners. Where setting characteristics and role relationships were similar, we found moderate levels of concordance in children's social interactive style. The strength of this association, however, was differentiated by the security of children's attachment relationship with

the mother. Children who had been classified as securely attached at 12 months showed greater consistency in their use of social strategies, indicating the salience of the infant-mother relationship in children's development of a coherent style of interacting with adults.

The fact that our study points to both contextual and relationship influences on social development suggests that the predictive power of mother-infant attachment relationships cannot be studied independently of context. These results resonate with current discussions on the continuity or discontinuity of contextual factors thought to influence the degree of concordance amongst children's attachment relationships with parents and non-parental adults (Howes & Matheson, 1992; Van IJzendoorn *et al*, 1992). Our work supports the argument suggested by Weisner (1988, cited in Howes & Matheson,1992, p.25) that observational studies of child development must take account of factors which define the context or "activity setting", and that the impact of relationships can best be understood within an analysis of the social context (ie. the people present, the tasks involved, the motives for action and the scripts for appropriate behaviour).

The argument that children's behaviour is influenced by the constraints and expectations of context and by the children's own expectations in specific role relationships with adults has implications for conducting and interpreting research across settings. In order to understand children's behaviour we need to understand the different meanings that different contexts and role relationships have for children. This emphasises the difficulties inherent in importing research paradigms across cultures and the importance of not assuming that specific contexts and role relationships will have the same meaning to children in different cultural settings. Unless we are open to exploring the different meanings of cross-cultural variations, we will not be able to achieve a truly comprehensive understanding of children's development.

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TABLE 1

INFANT-MOTHER ATTACHMENT SECURITY BY CHILD CARE EXPERIENCE IN THE FIRST YEAR OF LIFE

	Maternal Care N=19	Non-Maternal Care N=42	Total N=61
% Secure	.58	.71	.67
% Insecure	.42	.29	.33

Chi-square =1.09 (df,3) p=.30

TABLE 2

CHILDREN'S POSITIVE SOCIAL INTERACTIONS WITH ADULTS

	Home Total Adults (H)	Child Care Centre (C)	Strange Sit'n (S)	sign t-test p<.05
Positive Attention	9.9 (6.3)	10.2 (7.0)	7.8 (7.1)	H=C=S
Use as a Resource	21.1 (10.0)	7.7 (5.5)	11.9 (10.1)	H>S>C
Social Play	5.4 (4.3)	1.2 (2.1)	2.0 (3.6)	H>C=S
Offer Help	2.2 (2.8)	0.9 (1.7)	0.2 0.9	H>C>S
Total Positive Bids	36.7 (13.0)	20.0 (11.9)	22.0 (13.2)	H>C=S
Positive Affect	6.9 (5.1)	2.3 (2.8)	1.4 (2.4)	H>C>S

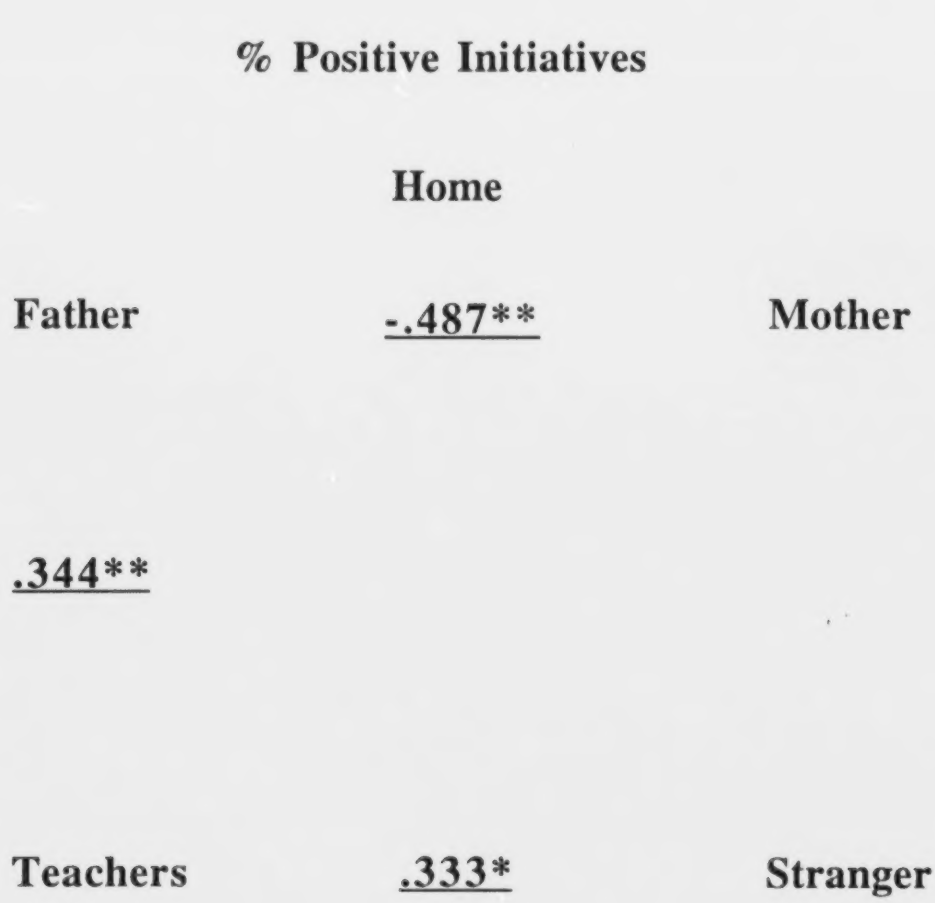
TABLE 3

CHILDREN'S NEGATIVE SOCIAL INTERACTIONS WITH ADULTS

	Home Total Adults (H)	Child Care Centre (C)	Strange Sit'n (S)	sign t-test p<.05
Negative Attention (hostile social)	1.6 (2.1)	0.5 (0.7)	2.2 (3.9)	S=H>C
Control	5.7 (4.0)	0.4 (0.8)	2.1 (3.1)	H>S>C
Total Negative Bids	7.3 (5.2)	0.6 (1.1)	4.3 (5.9)	H>S>C
Negative Affect	0.7 (1.2)	0.1 (0.5)	1.6 (4.7)	S=H>C

FIGURE 1

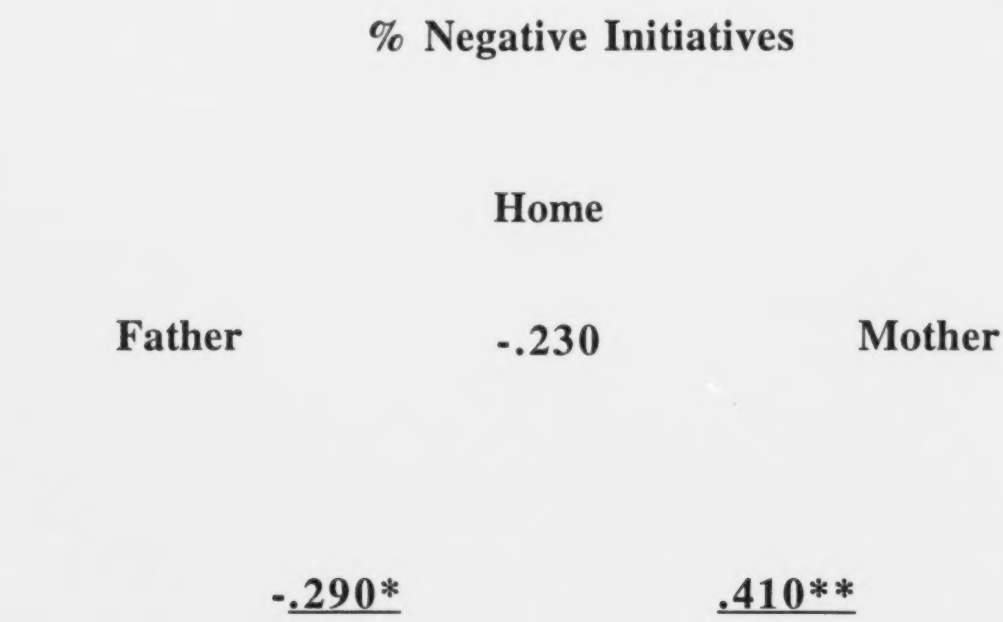
CONSISTENCY OF CHILDREN'S POSITIVE INTERACTION WITH ADULTS ACROSS SETTINGS



Pearson's Correlation Coefficients * p<.05, ** p<.01

FIGURE 2

CONSISTENCY OF CHILDREN'S NEGATIVE INTERACTION ACROSS PARTNERS AND SETTINGS



Pearson's Correlation Coefficients * p<.05, ** p<.01

TABLE 4

CONSISTENCY OF SOCIAL INTERACTIVE STYLE BY SECURITY OF INFANT-MOTHER ATTACHMENT

	Positive Bids Child-Teacher/ Child-Stranger	Positive Bids Child-Father/ Child-Teacher
Total (N=58)	.333*	.344**
Insecure (N=20)	ns	ns
Secure (N=38)	.506**	.377*
	Negative Bids **Child-Mother/** **Child-Stranger**	**Negative Bids** **Child-Father/** **Child-Stranger**
Total (N=58)	.410**	-.290*
Insecure (N=20)	ns	ns
Secure (N=38)	.420*	-.400*

Correlation Coefficients * $p<.05$, ** $p<.01$